

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Arminda W. Lathrop for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on April 25, 2005.

Title: Writing Home: Memoirs of a Working-Class Student

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This collection of personal essays, inspired by Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, raises questions about the separation that becomes apparent through writing, education, and transitions between class. The author uses her personal experience of writing in, and attending a private university to explore the interactions of class, literacy, and education. The memoirs portray a journey—a search for a literal and writerly “home.” While some of the memoirs in this collection focus on the author's personal experience as a writer in the academy, others illustrate the possible tension between family and education. Through the explication of emotion and experience, the author suggests that the comfort and familiarity of “home” and identity in writing—and in life—are internal, rather than external.

Writing Home:
Memoirs of a Working-Class Student

by
Arminda W. Lathrop

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Arminda W. Lathrop, Author

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Introduction: Looking for a Home

Let's begin with honesty. I had a difficult time when I began writing this collection of essays. I constantly found myself searching for a focus, a center, and most of all, a voice. Of course, these things have never come easily in my writing...or my life, for that matter. I can't remember a time when finding a center, an identity, has not been a long and fruitless process. In my many environments, I've always felt like the person who didn't quite fit with the others—the diversity factor. I remember doing those colorful little workbook exercises as a child where we had to circle the object that didn't belong in the lineup: a blue square among red circles, or a banana among bundles of grapes. Most of the time, it's great to be the blue square or the lone banana, but sometimes it's nice to belong.

I've not yet found my community of blue squares, though I've adopted many identities in an effort to do so. Perhaps I am some combination of blue square, red circle, orange triangle, and green rectangle (a quirky, odd shape, for which there is no cutout). I am Mindy Williamson, the darling daughter of Gene the logger and Debbie the secretary; student body president; athlete; and homecoming queen. I am "Armi," bubbly waitress at a seafood restaurant. I am Arminda Williamson Lathrop, graduate student and TA at Oregon State University. I am "Sherm," Will's wife. I am "Sister," Joe's older and overprotective sibling. I am Arminda-Mindy, follower of Christ. I am "Minderella," country urchin. I am "Mindela," snobby private college graduate. I am thankful that I'm not easily typified, that I'm difficult to define. On scholarship applications, I've always sold myself as being well-rounded. But I've

also experienced the challenge that comes with reconciling these different identities, niches, and expectations.

I'm a bit of a chameleon, skilled at hiding the fact that I always seem to be the shape that doesn't quite fit with the others. I perfected this ability my first year at the private liberal arts university I attended. As a first generation college student from Joseph, Oregon, I was self-conscious about my working class background, worried that my roots would become evident to my classmates, that I would be dismissed as an outsider. I quickly learned how to reject the fabric of my past and to embrace the culture of upper middle class. A naïve freshman, I remember sitting in my introduction to sociology class, learning about what separated me—or the person I hoped I would become—from my working class family, who I perceived as ignorant and simple. I began to minimize contact with my family and friends in rural eastern Oregon and tried to work my way into the social circles of friends at college, whose parents were doctors and executives, who were everything and had everything I strived for. It must have slipped my mind to tell my new friends that I was a “scholarship girl,” and that I could only afford to attend the university because of the grants and scholarships that paid all of my tuition and fees.

I remember making notes to myself during my first semester at college: “Shop at Abercrombie.” “Learn where (and what!) Adirondacks are.” “Learn Greek alphabet.” “Listen to ‘Dave Matthews Band’.” “Weave hair.” My friends were upper-middle class; their parents owned vacation homes; they shopped at expensive stores; they had attended private high schools. I, on the other hand, was a scholarship

girl. While I tried to conform to everyone in my new environment, my past and identity proved impossible to erase.

While sitting in class, my mind would travel away from the brick walls of my private school and flash back to Joseph, my father's logging truck, the monster truck rally we attended when I was twelve, my grandparents' farm on the Grande Ronde River, doublewide mobile homes, our hometown rodeo, and bluegrass barn dances. I thought of the way my grandmother smelled—like cigarettes and Wrigley's spearmint, the sick feeling in my stomach when I learned my uncle was going to prison, the way a rattlesnake rattle sounds both on and off of the snake, the gritty feeling of a horse after it has rolled in the pasture, the cracks on my father's hands that he fixed with super glue. The memories and images of my past were still quite strong as I moved further from the self that accompanied them. As I chatted with people at frat parties, joined my new friends for beach retreats at their parents' condos, and studied at our college bistro, I struggled with reconciling my past and present selves. I didn't seem to fit in when I traveled home, but I was also quite different from my private school friends.

My mother used to tell me that she regretted not going to college—that if she had it to do again, she would pursue a degree, live a different life. Both she and my father encouraged my education, though neither of my parents understood what it meant for me to attend college. They don't know what it is to cram for finals, to study until 2:00 a.m., to conference with a professor, to choose a major, to fill core requirements. My mother was a good student in high school, and she often proofread my high school papers and scholarship applications. College writing was different.

My level of writing and education surpassed her abilities. I would email her drafts of my papers to read and she would respond, “Looks fine to me.” At moments like this, I felt guilty for being in college—for getting to pursue a dream that was hers. I eventually stopped sending her papers, and we never discussed it; we both understood that we were no longer working at the same level. Though I felt the tension of college separating me from my parents, I chose to push this separation of education, to assume an identity that would make them proud of me, and to take the opportunities that they didn’t have. I distanced myself from them and from my past as I embraced education and the chance to “be someone,” as my mother put it.

The tension I felt was quite similar to the feelings Richard Rodriguez conveys in his book, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Rodriguez explains, “I grew up victim to a disabling confusion. As I grew fluent in English, I no longer could speak Spanish with confidence.” When I read Rodriguez’s memoir in my Introduction to Literacy Studies course, I couldn’t help reflecting on how our situations are similar. To some extent, everyone who seeks education or learns a different language deals with the barriers of a new literacy. For Rodriguez, a new language led to education; for me, education led to a new language (the language of the university and upper middle class); for both of us, language and education led to separation. Just as Rodriguez was a “scholarship boy,” I was a “scholarship girl; and like Rodriguez, I also adopted a new identity as I attempted to conform to the standards of my new literacy and moved further from the literacy of my family. I began to etch out a set of “social rules” that I adhered to in my college environment—

one of which was to mention my family and background as little as possible. I was an aspiring socialite, stylish and intellectual, attempting to transcend the barriers of class.

Just as I had to mold my identity as a college student, I had to reshape my identity as a college writer. And this new identity in my writing also had strict rules I followed in order to become more “academic” and refined:

Rule 1: Never mention yourself or say the word “I” in academic writing. A writer would not want to attract attention to herself. Academic writing isn’t personal.
~Professor Coen

Rule 2: Never say “you” or “yourself” in academic writing. After all, to whom are you talking? Only unsophisticated writers use second person. ~Professor Goldbloom

Rule 3: Avoid using colons when introducing quotes. In fact, avoid them entirely. They make one’s writing look “choppy.” ~Professor Michel

Rule 4: Do not pose questions in an academic paper. As the writer, you’re there to *answer* the questions, not ask them. ~Professor Barbinsky

Rule 5: Always put your thesis statement in the last sentence of your introductory paragraph. This must be one sentence, not two. ~Professor Goldbloom

Rule 6: Avoid using parentheses in an academic essay. If it’s important enough to say in parentheses, you can say it in a regular sentence. The parentheses are distracting.
~Professor Barbinsky

Rule 7: Your thesis shouldn’t contain the word I, and should always use words like “assert” or “propose” in order to appear more active. ~Professor Barbinsky

Rule 8: Paragraphs should be a minimum of four sentences and a maximum of eight sentences. Paragraphs should be aesthetically pleasing. They should make a point, but not be overwhelming. ~Professor Brumbaugh

Rule 9: Sentences need to be one to two lines only. If they’re longer, you’ll sound like you’re rambling. ~Professor Michel

Rule 10: Write in a style that is your own. Your writing should be original and indicative of your character. ~Professors Stone, Michel, Brumbaugh, Barbinsky, Goldbloom, Bowers, Nolley, & Coen

In my first writing class at University of Puget Sound, my professor told me that academic writing should never be personal. This rule provided the foundation for many to follow. I was an unconfident student and an unconfident writer, determined to meet the university's writing demands, so I eagerly accepted these rules. I assumed that part of meeting these demands meant separating myself from my writing as much as possible in order to become more "academic." Thus began my transformation into a writer of multiple identities.

Each new writing class seemed to identify a new writing "rule" that I needed to follow to write successfully. The problem with these "rules" was that they were merely my professors' quirks and preferences, rather than actual writing conventions. Their preferences, combined with my need to please, created a problem in my development as a writer, and in my writing process. I wrote for the private audience in my head that was composed of professors' voices and faces, reminding me what "academic" writing should look and sound like. Thus my imagination produced a rhetorical audience that wasn't always appropriate for my writing occasion. I dismissed my own style, creativity and preferences, and replaced them with a dry, "academic" sound. When I sat down to write, I often spent countless hours perusing my collective rulebook to determine which of my professors' "rules" I was breaking.

Rule 10 was the most complicated. I had no idea, after adhering to my list of writing rules, how I was supposed to stamp any of my writing with originality. My "voice" was not my own, but one comprised of numerous professors' writing pet peeves. So, with all of these rules inhibiting my writing, why did I become an

English major? I became an English major because I was quite good at following “rules,” because my professors praised me for my academic writing, because science was out of the question, and humanities majors are limited at liberal arts colleges. I found a perverse kind of pleasure in the art of anticipating expectations and molding myself accordingly, both in writing and as a person. I did not become an English major because I enjoyed writing, and I did not pursue a graduate degree in English because writing was my passion; rather, writing was a challenge, struggle, and way to please.

The writing rules of graduate school were less stringent and I began to realize and understand my relationship with writing. In my graduate writing, I took more risks, as I began to search for a style and tone separate from the audience in my head, but my attempts returned no satisfaction. I came to this thesis as a graduate student who has spent the last two years searching for a home, both in life and in writing. It was when I began considering topics and approaches for my thesis that I realized I had no style, no voice, no passion apart from professors’ rules and expectations. I deliberately chose to work with Dr. Ede, who I knew would provide room for my exploration, rather than additional rules. When I sat down to write, even to brainstorm ideas for my thesis, I stared blankly at my computer screen, unsure of how and what I would write apart from professors’ demands. For the first time, there weren’t any style or content barriers, professors’ quirks, or preferences dictating my writing and I was voiceless.

Dr. Ede said repeatedly in our first meeting that she was not going to tell me what to write. “But you have to,” I wanted to tell her, “You see, I am not a writer, just a chameleon!” Instead, I said, “I’ll think about it.” At our second meeting, I had to confess to her that I was unsure of my writing ability, that I didn’t enjoy writing, and that I wasn’t sure how to write without an assignment sheet in front of me. She sat thoughtfully and finally suggested that I work through some possible reasons as to why I felt inhibited as a writer. Together we decided that personal essays would be a possible avenue to explore my difficulty with writing, as well as a possible means of finding my elusive “home” as a writer. I was excited about this prospect of exploration, but unsure of writing about myself because everything I had learned about writing taught me to reject the idea that I was worth writing about. My undergraduate experience flashed through my mind: How could academic writing be personal?

I decided to defy the “rules” engrained in my writing process. I chose to write personal essays over writing a “traditional” thesis because I wanted, for the first time in my college career, to write what I felt called to write in the way I wanted to write it—at least, I wanted to try. I was excited that I was responsible for generating material and exploring the process of writing; and believe me, this essay collection was a process, as I attempted to nail down understanding that always seemed a page and a memory away. For the first time in my writing, I wrote to uncover my own meaning, for which there is no set answer that my professor is waiting for me to uncover. With this essay writing, I established the answers. Of course, for much of my writing, there are no “answers,” but there is an evident process and passionate

expression, as I attempted to write all that I wanted to write, and to use writing as I have never been allowed to use it.

My journey toward reaching a topic for my thesis writing was largely illustrative of the topic of my thesis: I searched for a topic that would click, one that would make me feel at home in my writing. The process of personal writing was somewhat hypnotic, as my writing took over my thoughts and each thought that entered my mind turned into a narrative sentence, as potential topics and realizations swirled through my brain. While jogging, sentences often popped into my head—sentences about how running is indicative of life, and how running presents escape from reality. While waiting tables, I kept thinking, “Wow, my experiences waitressing could make an interesting topic.” Standing in front of my class, or grading essays, I often resolved, “I am a teacher. This is interesting. This stimulates me. This is what I will write about.” It wasn’t that I believed I only needed to write about one topic, but I felt I needed grounding.

My hectic life and multiple identities prevented this. I’ve always been indecisive. As I commuted from Portland to Oregon State and then back to Salem for work at the restaurant, the topic of my thesis would change at least three times, as ideas traveled through my mind. Would I write about my role as a wife? My desire to be a mother? My need to be a “mother” to everyone around me? My paranoia as a woman? My tension about my family? Before I finally decided on my current topic, I had written over sixty pages and tossed them out. My writing wasn’t fitting together well. As I began to understand why I had difficulty choosing a topic, I began to realize what my topic would be.

The essays that follow are a glimpse of this process of finding a “home” in writing and in my life, as well as the process of recovering confidence and the roots of my identity. The essays were also a way for me to write toward understanding and interpretation. The main essays are about my family, whom I spent most of my time at college attempting to reject. My writing shows my attempt to reconcile my past and present. My intention is for these essays to illustrate the tension that I felt as a result of my family ties and the pull of the university, and also for them to explain how my struggle as a college writer was a result of the colliding demands of both family and education—demands of my past and demands of my present. Perhaps the essays will paint the picture of the effects I felt from the university and its suggestions about class and education. Ultimately, I hope to show the process of what it is to travel back to my family, my town, and my past to recover a voice and an identity once lost between the layers of a private university education.

I suppose you could say that this thesis is, in many ways, my attempt (and I say “attempt” without any assumptions of success) at a condensed *Hunger of Memory*—a memoir about how education has created a tension in my identity (or should I say identities?) and a guilt and shame about my background. Though I’m not trying to mimic Rodriguez, his book stimulated many realizations about education and my life, and gave me permission to write about them. I hope these essays pose questions about what it is to transition between environments and literacies, as well as suggesting potential areas of discomfort that receiving a college education can create. I’m thankful that being a “scholarship girl” has lent me the wonderful opportunities to afford an education, but I sometimes wonder what my relationships and identity

would be like if I were still a simple girl living in Joseph, Oregon. I also wonder if it is my lack of identity—the blue square in me—that prevents me from settling amongst a row of red circles.

To Be With Deer

When I was a child, our garage was the home of deer carcasses. It seemed that between the months of October and March, whether during hunting season or a time of special hunting “tags,” a skinned carcass hung from the boards nailed to the ceiling just to the right of my father’s air compressor, his winter skis from the seventies, and the deluxe tool chest we bought him the Christmas of ‘84. The smell and texture of a skinned carcass tagged “wild game” is still very real to my senses—fresh game smells much like earth. “Don’t touch it,” my mother would say as I stood staring at the red and white marble of deer flesh. I never understood why the legs were always tied together. Nor had I ever witnessed the skinning of a deer; they always arrived in our driveway on the back of a pickup truck, skinned and tied.

Although my father was responsible for some of the carcasses, and sometimes my mother as well (two hunting tags meant meat for an entire year), relatives, friends and neighbors also used our garage as temporary cold storage for their trophy kills. Our garage was the meat locker for the entire neighborhood, mostly because both of our cars were running and we had the room. In exchange for storage, we sometimes received deer pepperoni or small white meat packages labeled “Venison ‘85” or “Deerburger ’86.” I knew of deer in four forms: wandering through my mother’s garden, attempting to cross the highway near our house, hanging from a hook in our garage, or wrapped in neat white packages.

Our neighborhood was close-knit, as was our small mountain town, and hunting served as a way of uniting people. Growing up, I don’t recall knowing of a family who didn’t apply for deer or elk tags in the winter. Our neighbor across the

street worked part time in taxidermy. The dumpster in front of his house was always filled with rank-smelling animal remains that he had discarded after receiving his latest dead bear, cougar, or deer. If the carcass was impressive enough, he would call all of the neighbors and we would gather at his house to stare at the recently slaughtered animal he planned to stuff.

A set of deer antlers graced the front of our garage just below the driveway light as if to say, "This is it: the place where the deer come after they die." Ours wasn't the only home in our neighborhood adorned with deer or elk antlers; the antlers were a source of pride and people took the opportunity to display them proudly. To be able to hunt and kill something was a sure indication of the ability to survive. I never had the desire to hunt and usually cried when a bird hit our front picture window, meeting its doom, but most of my friends and family members were hunters. In Joseph, Oregon, the town of my childhood, the age of twelve meant power, freedom, and the transition to adulthood: children could begin taking hunter's safety classes when they were twelve and be hunting in just two short months. I remember when my brother shot and killed his first deer at the age of thirteen. My grandfather had the antlers mounted above a plaque engraved with the words: "Joe, 1st buck." Much to my grandfather's disappointment, the plaque should have said, "only buck," because Joe has had no desire to hunt since the trauma of his first kill.

Although I wanted to be just like my mother, who often hunted with my father, I was terrified of guns and couldn't imagine killing an animal. Our gun cupboard was located just above the cupboard where we kept mittens and stocking hats. There was no padlock on the gun cupboard, which didn't matter because neither

my brother nor I were ever curious about the guns. To us, guns were guns, mere tools like screwdrivers and hammers, just a way of obtaining meat. Everyone we knew owned a gun for hunting, and the guns, like the game they killed, were also a source of pride.

Until I went to college, I never realized that some people only buy meat at the grocery store. The grocery store was a last resort for meat for my family—a reserve if my father didn't have a successful hunting season and no one we knew had a cow or pig to butcher, which was rare. My mother would complain about “store-bought hamburger” as she stood in front of the stove cooking stroganoff or Hamburger Helper (a family favorite), claiming that the hamburger was grisly and tasted weird. I was thankful to take a break from venison, which had the same earthy, gamey smell after it was cooked that it had hanging in our garage.

As I grew older, my parents hunted less, and the hanging deer carcasses made fewer appearances. In fact, I haven't seen a hanging deer carcass in at least nine years. Although I travel home to Joseph occasionally from what my parents call “the city” (which seems to be a term for any place with a population of over three thousand), they have since divorced, and my father has been too busy trying to “stay afloat” with his construction business to hunt. Someone else now owns that garage—a single woman in her sixties—and it is no longer doubling as meat storage. It probably houses a wheelbarrow, some snow equipment, and jumper cables.

But the deer carcasses, as morbid as they seem, meant togetherness. The deer carcasses meant that our neighbors would sit in the driveway on the tailgate of their pickup truck and drink black coffee from a thermos while they talked with my parents

about their latest hunting expedition. The deer carcasses meant that my grandmother would come and stay at our house while my grandfather went hunting with my father. We could spend a whole week putting together jigsaw puzzles. The deer meant family dinners prepared by my mother, photos of my parents together, holding rifles in their winter clothes. They meant an escape to the woods for my father from long days spent working in the cold. As much as I hated venison, the deer carcasses symbolized a time when my family was a cohesive unit, and a time when I wanted nothing more than to be the daughter of hunters from the north end of College street in Joseph, Oregon, where people hunted in the winter and fished in the summer.

As I matured, I began to want more than life in Joseph could offer. I couldn't picture myself graduating from high school and settling down to marry, have children, and stand in my own driveway, gawking at freshly killed deer carcasses with my neighbors. I wanted to be the first person in my family to attend college, to experience life in a different environment, to meet people from diverse backgrounds, to break out of my neighborhood, family, and town. I wanted to sip lattes on a university campus, try sushi, drive in rush hour traffic, and buy meat from a butcher in a grocery store.

Since I have moved away from Joseph, I have shopped in the meat departments of grocery stores in Tacoma, Portland, and Salem. Mom was right; store-bought hamburger does taste different. I haven't yet seen venison in the grocery store, but I'm sure it can be found, although it's probably quite expensive—and it's probably not wrapped in neat white butcher paper packages labeled "venison '05" with a permanent black marker. I don't miss venison, but I miss what deer and deer

hunting meant to me and to my family. As the deer become a distant memory, so does my identification with my hometown and the family of my childhood.

I know that I will never identify with Joseph the way I once did, but I still long to visit and experience the Joseph way of life that feels oddly foreign yet familiar at the same time. The trip from Portland to Joseph takes roughly five-and-a-half hours. There is a tunnel over the freeway heading east right before Hood River. When I was in high school, the tunnel used to signify that whatever trip I was on for school that took us to the “big city” was over, and it was time to head back to boring Joseph and a slow way of life. I usually held my breath, hoping to return to the city again soon. The tunnel now serves as a gateway from the noisy, fast-paced city into the beautiful, peaceful setting of my childhood. I hold my breath when we pass through, thankful to be escaping from a routine that still seems new although I’ve been in college (in the “city”) for six years. My husband and I will stop just outside of Pendleton for gas before continuing on to LaGrande and making our way through the windy canyon and last leg of our trip.

Between LaGrande and Imbler, I notice the mint fields, which is always an indication that I’m almost home. Once we’re past Imbler, we must be on the lookout for deer. I scan the fields alongside the road as I drive, watching closely for sets of eyes. At the sight of two sets, I brake quickly, but the deer look at the road and head back in the direction from which they came. I turn to my husband, nostalgically.

“Oh...honey...deer.”

More practical than nostalgic, he replies, “They’d better be careful or they’re going to be flat deer.” He pauses. “Deer pancakes, roadkill sandwiches, deerloaf.”

I ignore his gruesome humor and consider the presence of deer. While they signify home to me, they aren’t commonplace in my environment like they once were. I am no longer with the deer; they are somehow unfamiliar, yet they represent memories of comfort.

My father has moved away from Joseph, but my mother now lives in a small cabin beside the river just outside of Joseph, close to the mountains. As we pull into her long driveway, which feels far from home, we notice deer—a lot of deer—eating grass in the forest that surrounds her house. The deer that line her lane look up from the grass they’re eating and stare at us. My husband looks at me. “Guard deer?”

Once we’re near the house, my mother runs out of her front door wearing the hand-me-down GAP overalls I gave her my second year of college. As we get out of the car, I notice the deer that stand in her yard. A doe and fawn peek their heads out from behind her garage. I hug my mother saying, “There’s a...uh...a lot of deer here, mom.”

My mother glows. “I know. These two” she points “came back from last year. That one over there I call ‘Blackie.’ They’re eating the corn I bought at the feed store.” She motions to the tall stack of plastic feed bags just inside her garage door.

“Huh.” I say, trying to suppress a laugh, thinking of the incredible irony that my mother is now feeding the deer after they spent so many years feeding us.

Perhaps she feels guilty about the hanging carcasses. “So, you probably don’t eat venison any more,” I say, chuckling.

“No. I just couldn’t. I sit on the porch and watch these guys for hours,” she says, motioning to the deer standing in the lawn. Once again, she is close to the deer. No mounted antlers or taxidermy involved. My mother has never really left the deer, though the nature of her relationship with them has changed. She has also never moved out of Joseph; she rarely crosses the county line.

I, on the other hand, have clearly left the deer, though my memories of them take me to my childhood and a time when I usually saw our dinner hanging somewhere before it was cooked. As we walk through my mother’s lawn, she stops to pick up an antler from the ground. “I saw that he was missing this and I wondered if I would find it,” she says pointing to a deer without antlers.

“What? He lost an antler?” I ask, confused. “It just fell off?”

“Well, it’s that time of year,” my mother says, looking at the antler.

“You mean they lose their antlers?” I ask, motioning toward the deer.

My mother buries her head in feigned shame. “Yes they lose their antlers! You didn’t know that?”

“No.”

She shakes her head in disappointment. “Whose daughter are you?...I wouldn’t tell many people about this.” She pauses. “You’re really a city girl now, huh?”

I look at the antler-less deer. “Yeah, I guess so.” We walk through her yard as she continues to talk about the raccoons and squirrels that she also feeds, but I am

distracted. Oddly, the deer mark transitions in our lives, as we both press on in our different environments, the memories of venison still present, but distant in our minds. My mother walks through her new yard with her bags of corn and a heart of goodwill, and I, the daughter with the university education from the west side of the state, am ashamed for not knowing that deer lose their antlers once a year. The deer as I once knew them when they meant closeness and belonging, and a peaceful feeling of commonality with my family and community are now distant. Now they are a representation of my past, of a part of my life that has cycled through...like antlers in the spring.

Around the Bend

“Bring a song and a smile for the Banjo,

“Better get while the gettin’s good,

“Hitch a ride to the end of the highway,

“Where the neon turns to wood.

“Come on a Rising Wind,

“They’re comin’ up around the bend.

-John Fogerty

My mother loves to tell the story of when she traveled to Portland to attend The “Ramblin’ Rod” Show as a child. “Ramblin’ Rod” was a TV show that aired old cartoons in front of a live audience of children. Between cartoons, Rod would often do wacky stunts and interview his audience members. I have heard my mother’s story of this visit often and know it by heart. She sat in the front row at the show and put her head down each time the camera passed her between the airing of cartoons. She was just a shy girl from a small town in Oregon. When the time came for Rod to interview a child from the audience, she prayed that he wouldn’t choose her. But she was unable to remain anonymous. Rod approached her with his microphone. “Hello there, and what’s your name?” he asked in his goofy, jovial voice.

“T’m...uh...Deb-bie,” she managed to squeak out.

“Hi Debbie. Say, where’re you from?”

“Uh...Troy. Troy, Oregon,” my mother said timidly.

“Troy, Oregon?” Rod paused. “I think you must be mistaken, Debbie. There is no Troy, Oregon. You must mean Troy, Idaho.” Rod laughed.

My mother did not. “No. Oregon.” She looked into the camera.

Rod ignored my mother and began to move on to the next child.

“Troy, Oregon!” my mother stood and yelled at Rod and the television camera, as if to prove that both she and the place she was from did, in fact, exist.

From the parents’ viewing room, my grandmother writhed with anger at the fact that Ramblin Rod’, just a “city guy,” would have the audacity to say that he knew there was no such place as Troy, Oregon. When the show ended, she grabbed my mother’s hand and quickly left the building, cursing, and wondering out loud just who, exactly, Ramblin’ Rod thought he was to act as if he knew the entire geography of Oregon. There was such a place as Troy, Oregon, and that place was their home. That place was small—very small—but had its home on the map, along with cities like Portland, nonetheless.

Troy, Oregon is located in a deep canyon on the Grande Ronde River near the border of Oregon and Idaho. When my mother was a child, the approximate population of Troy was twenty-three. Of course, there were ten people in her family, so really, there were thirteen others, excluding her family, the Kieseckers. Their farm and orchard were beside the river. The farm was rundown but had many buildings, including their old ramshackle house, large barn, bunkhouse, cookhouse, horse corral, and shop. In front of the house, facing the road, there was a large wooden sign (engraved by a chainsaw) that read, “Kiesecker,” just in case their residence was

confused with one of the four others in the area. The Kieseckers were wild—they were moonshiners, hunters, fiddlers—and the old farm had a reputation for its crazy barn dances that extended to towns as far as three hours away.

As a child, I visited this old farm in the canyon often, sometimes attending infamous “Kiesecker dances” with my parents. Of course, my mother would make my brother and me go into the house and go to bed once the drunkenness began, but we loved to watch the dancing and were amused by the drama that would eventually turn to violence once the Jack Daniels and moonshine took effect. Until then, the only sounds that could be heard coming out of the barn were fiddle licks, clapping, and cheering. My grandfather and one of my uncles played their fiddles while my grandmother played the piano, another uncle played the banjo, and yet another uncle played the harmonica. They sprinkled cornmeal on the floor of the old barn and we danced to their bluegrass until our feet tired of the hard barn floor. People would come from small towns within a two hundred mile radius to hear the Kiesecker’s music, drink their moonshine, and dance to their bluegrass. There were no police in Troy to regulate the noise—or the violence, for that matter.

There is a picture on the wall in the corner of the barn of my grandfather and John Fogerty standing beside a dead moose. They had just returned from a hunting trip. The moose was the trophy. I used to stare at this picture every time I visited Troy, begging my mother to tell me stories of the great Fogerty. Even as a child, I knew that John Fogerty was a rock ‘n’ roll legend, and arguably one of the best lyricists and guitar players ever to come across the radio airwaves. John Fogerty was

also perhaps the biggest thing—much bigger and more and more well known than Ramblin' Rod and his silly show—to ever arrive in little Troy, Oregon.

Fogerty had relatives in eastern Oregon, and for some reason, decided to make his summer home—a modest cabin beside the river, a mile downriver from the boisterous Kiesecker residence—in Troy. At the pinnacle of his music career, Fogerty would take breaks from concert touring to travel to the tranquility of his cabin in Troy. And when he became bored with tranquility after a couple of days, he traveled a mile upriver to the Kieseckers for some home cooking and bluegrass music.

The rock 'n' roll legend chose to make his first appearance at a Kiesecker dance before the Kieseckers or any other residents of Troy knew of him or his fame. My mother tells me that the first time Fogerty went to a dance, he asked if he could play a couple of songs on his guitar for the crowd. When he told my grandfather that he was from the band "Creedence Clearwater Revival," my grandfather misunderstood him and thought he simply said "Clearwater,"—the power company that controlled Troy's electricity. My grandfather announced, "This is John. He's from Clearwater Power Company and he wants to play some guitar." The crowd cheered, but no one knew who Fogerty was. In Troy, he was an opening act for the well-known Kiesecker band, and simply played his guitar as if he was an average guy working for the power company, making music in his spare time.

After his first appearance in the Kiesecker's barn, Fogerty spent a lot of time with my mother and her family. I think he may have been amused by their "down-home" attitude and way of life. Once, after an unsuccessful day spent casting and

recasting his fishing pole into the Grande Ronde, he asked my mother for fishing tips. She was a young girl, but a successful fisher nonetheless, and told him that she just used nightcrawlers—no fancy bait—just simple nightcrawlers that she gathered in the dark and kept in a margarine container in the back of the refrigerator. She wasn't flattered that a rock 'n' roll star asked her for fishing advice because, to her, Fogerty was just a man who visited occasionally and owned a cabin a mile downriver.

It was not until my mother entered high school and boarded with hosts in Joseph (two hours from Troy) that she knew of Fogerty's notoriety and began to listen to his band on the radio. He frequented Troy less and less as his career took him to different countries, and he eventually sold his cabin in Troy on the Grande Ronde. Still, my mother tells us, knowing Fogerty provided sufficient fuel for her to brag to her classmates about her time spent with him, and the fact that he, John Fogerty, lead singer and guitarist for "Creedence Clearwater Revival," asked her for fishing advice practically made her famous as well. She and the rest of the Kieseckers lost touch with Fogerty as the years passed, and his photo, pasted to the wall of the barn, marked his only presence at the infamous Kiesecker dances.

I'm embarrassed to say that as a child, and even a teenager, I also used Fogerty as fuel for bragging. "Yeah, I'm going to Troy this weekend, to my grandparents" I would tell my friends nonchalantly. "It's gonna be pretty fun...they play music." Many of my friends knew of Troy. They knew it was small and insignificant; some had traveled there occasionally with their parents for a picnic or

fishing trip. Then I would begin the bragging. “Do you guys know who John Fogerty is?” John Fogerty is obviously not a name that most children would be familiar with, but many of the kids had heard his songs. “Well, have you heard ‘Bad Moon Rising’? Or, ‘Rollin’ on the River’?” I would sing some of the song for them. “Well, he knows my grandparents. He played music with them. It’s a pretty big deal. Who knows, maybe I’ll see him.”

In some respects, it was embarrassing to be associated with my mother’s family. The Kieseckers were loud moonshiners who lived in the middle of nowhere and were so wild that they had a crazy reputation in three counties. But when I was young, I was proud to be related to them. After all, John Fogerty knew them and he was a rock ‘n’ roll star; the only famous person to whom I had a distant association liked the Kieseckers. I listened to Fogerty’s music often, thinking that he and I somehow had a connection through Troy and my family. Although many of Fogerty’s songs are about the south, I always thought that his song “Around the Bend” was about Troy. Perhaps I was just hopeful that his time spent in Troy was meaningful. Still, I was sure that his lyrics about the dirt road and the banjo had to be about Kiesecker dances. I would listen to the song over and over again, trying to find words in the song that were specifically about Troy as I pictured Fogerty playing his guitar in my grandparents’ barn. If I could link myself to Fogerty through our association with the Kieseckers, it would mean that I didn’t need to be as embarrassed of them.

I used Fogerty’s music as an inspiration to connect to my family’s bluegrass music, which wasn’t the “coolest” kind of music for a kid to be listening to when I

was growing up. But I believed the music meant something to Fogerty, so I resolved that I would try to be a part of it. I convinced my mother to pay for piano lessons so I could play the piano just like my grandmother. When my mother told people in our small town that I was playing the piano, they would say, “Well, she’s got that Kiesecker blood in her. She’s going to be a musician!” One summer, for our town’s annual parade, my cousins, brother and I actually set up instruments in the back of my uncle’s truck, dressed in country western clothes, and pretended to play our instruments as we rode down the street in the back of the truck. There was a big banner that extended the length of the blue Chevy that said, “Future Kiesecker Bluegrass Band.” We paraded down Main Street behind two clowns and in front of a young girl who put her saddle on her dog. We won first prize.

My desire to play the piano was short-lived. I was a child of phases, and directly after the piano lessons came gymnastics. As I moved out of middle school and into high school, I still listened to John Fogerty—oddly, he became a part of my identity like the pink tennis shoes I wore until they fell apart or my frizzy blonde hair—but it became difficult to maintain my connection with my mother’s family. The Kieseckers seemed to become more infamous with each passing year because of their wild dances (that usually turned violent), their short tempers, and their run-ins with police who had to drive two hours down into the canyon to sort out brawls. People in our small town would gossip about the notorious Kieseckers. When they did so, I pretended to barely know them: “Yeah, they’re crazy. We hardly see them anymore.” Not even their association with John Fogerty could redeem my pride or bragging rights.

My parents, brother, and I traveled to Troy for Thanksgiving, and occasionally Easter. I sometimes heard my mother on the phone, making excuses to my grandmother about why we could not come to visit: “Well, Mindy’s got a basketball game tomorrow and we have to help her get ready for it. She’s busy-busy, you know.” On the holidays, my mother prefaced our trips to Troy by saying, “Family is family. We need to make an appearance or they’ll think I’m mad at them.” Despite her embarrassment of being a Kiesecker, she was still loyal.

I was my grandmother’s “Minderella,” and although I’d matured and changed since my days of boogying to bluegrass on the barn floor, she chose to remember me as a young girl wearing country western clothes, my light blonde braids bouncing with my steps. But, by high school, I no longer wore western clothes; I pushed country music and bluegrass as far away as possible; I developed an identity that directly conflicted with any Kiesecker blood that might run through my veins. I was Mindy Williamson: athlete, academic, student council member, overachiever, homecoming queen. I listened to reggae and hip-hop. I still had one thing in common with my barn dance roots though: John Fogerty. I remained a loyal fan. He was the Kiesecker claim to fame and the glue that enabled us to identify with each other.

And for some reason, despite all of my changes, when I was at the old rundown house with the wooden sign out front that said, “Kiesecker,” I was still one of them...if only hanging by a Fogerty. I would sit at the table and ask my grandfather to tell me stories about his hunting trips with Fogerty, the music he played with Fogerty, the way Fogerty sounded. My grandfather would tell the stories,

pretending that he hadn't told me them a hundred times before, and I would listen intently, avoiding all conversation about the present.

I had become a different Mindy than the Mindy my grandparents and uncles knew, and it was easier to not let them know this. My life was headed in a new direction that would take me far from the old barn and far from Joseph, away to college, and this concept—the concept of a college education—was so distant from a Kiesecker way of life that I knew my grandparents wouldn't understand my choices. The space I was beginning to create between myself and them would ultimately become apparent (if it hadn't already), but I tried to put off this moment for as long as possible.

I can pinpoint our true moment of separation—the moment when I was no longer considered one of them. During my first visit home from the university, my changes and distance from them became obvious. I was the first member of the family to live outside the county, and the first to attend college. Not even Fogerty could save us during my visit to Troy after I had officially become a college student. To my family, true education is knowing what type of rifle to use to kill a certain animal, or knowing how to drive out of the canyon successfully in three feet of snow. Formal education translates to insufficiency and insecurity; formal education is merely “booksmarts,” as they would say, not actual knowledge. I learned of this distinction—a distinction that inevitably creates separation—my first Thanksgiving spent at Troy after I drove eight hours west to seek higher education.

It is the coldest Thanksgiving in our small county's recorded history. My father steers his truck carefully around icy corners as my mother grasps the dash tensely and my brother drools on the foggy window he is leaning against, fast asleep. I sit in the middle, nervous. It's my first Thanksgiving home since I began college, and I fear that my family will detect the changes in my personality and perceptions that I desperately want to hide. We're driving down into the canyon and along the river to Troy. The Kieseckers aren't completely secluded in their area of the woods; they have neighbors within a five-mile radius, but most of them are wanted or have been under a wanted status at some point, which is why they chose the peace and quiet of a completely secluded area by the Grande Ronde River.

We make it through the icy spots on the road, pass the wooden sign that says "Kiesecker," and turn into the driveway near the old shop that marks the entrance to my grandparents' property. As we near their house, I flashback quickly to my childhood—summer days picking corn and peaches, washing laundry in the bunkhouse with grandma, gathering eggs from the hen house each morning, and summer evenings dancing in the old barn to the fiddle, banjo, piano, and harmonica. I look into the pasture beside the barn where I remember watching my grandfather shoot one of his cows point-blank with a small pistol as its huge carcass fell to the ground. My grandparents had run out of meat. I stood in the kitchen window screaming and crying as I watched the milk cow moo the death of her child. My grandmother came and put her hand on my shoulder to console me before saying, "Well, there's our steak."

As we pass the barn and bunkhouse and stop in front of the house, my grandmother comes out of the front door with a cigarette in one hand, the other hand on her hips, huffing, "It's about damn time you showed up! Turkey's cold. C'mon." I am unable to adequately describe my grandmother, but I think "callous" would be a mild description. She boasts about her collection of shotguns that she utilizes every time one of the animals on the farm begins to create trouble, which explains why my grandfather can never "keep a good workin' dog around." "Come on in; everybody's a'waitin'," she says, grabbing pies from my mother's arms. She looks at me. "Minderella, you're all growed up." That I'm "all growed up," I think, articulately describes the source my anxiety as I follow her through the front door.

My uncle greets us just inside the door with a fifth of Jack Daniels. He holds up the bottle chuckling. "How the hell are ya'll?"

My grandma motions toward my uncle's head. "Did ya see his new hair?" The toupee is crooked.

My mother says, "Wow! Boy! You look ten years younger!"

One of my other uncles sits on the seventies-style blue shag carpet below a shelf in the corner playing his harmonica. Later, when we are done with dinner, he will stand in the kitchen and eat the scraps from our plates, so as to "not let good food go to waste." The shelf has been a display case for thunder eggs and rattlesnake rattles since I was a child. I notice some new rattles, gathered no doubt after my grandmother had run-ins with rattlers on her way to the mailbox and promptly grabbed a shovel, slicing their heads off. She summons everyone to the table by

placing her thumb and forefinger in her mouth and whistling. “Hey! Listen up! Sit down! Food’s cold!”

We sit at the table (several large pieces of plywood resting on sawhorses) and my grandmother brings the turkey in, yelling into my grandfather’s hearing aids, “Carve the bird!” Plates clang, people shout, dinner begins. At our end of the table, my youngest uncle is discussing the scandal behind his recent loss at the local fiddle contest (the judge was an uncle to the first-place fiddler) while my aunt sits at the other end of the table complaining about the dryness of the turkey. She and my grandmother begin to yell at one another before my grandfather reminds them to “mind their damned manners.” Then one of my other uncles—the fiddle player—turns to me and begins the dreaded conversation. “So, Mindy, what kinda stuff they teachin’ ya in college?” He says “college” like it is a distant planet and I am an extraterrestrial. Of course, because I am the first member of my family to travel to this place beyond our galaxy, both they and I feel that I am somewhat of an alien.

“Um, well,” I say between bites, “I’m taking a writing class right now, and economics...”

“Economics? What in the hell is that?”

“It’s sort of like learning about money and how it works...you know, like ‘supply and demand’.”

“Like, uh, personal finance in Mr. Higgins’ class?”

“Yes, kind of.”

From the other end of the table, my aunt interrupts. “So, Mindy, you gonna be an educated idiot now?” The table erupts in laughter. This is not the first time I

have heard this expression, one my family adopted to describe anyone who pursues an education (other than diesel mechanic school, which is upright and virtuous) beyond high school. Next, my uncle utters the dreaded sentence—the words I knew I could not escape, but had been optimistically trying to avoid: “Mindy thinks her shit smells a little better than everyone else’s.” More laughter. As repulsive as this phrase is, I have heard these words uttered at many a dinner table since my childhood, but never to describe me. I am now officially other.

I choke on my sweet potatoes. Still, I pretend that I have not been blatantly labeled as an outsider. “Grandma, I notice you got some new rattles. Been killin’ a few snakes?” The language sounds unnatural, and I know that my sentence structure has changed beyond reversion.

She scoops mashed potatoes onto her plate. “Damned things thicker than fog this summer. Killed one under the front porch.”

My grandfather interrupts, “With my brand new toolbox! Blamed woman.” He continues eating.

My grandmother shrugs. “Had to smash it with somethin’.”

Continuing on, attempting to keep the focus off of me, I call on Fogerty. “Hey granddad, I hear John Fogerty is singing again. He’s released a new CD with some new songs on it.”

My uncle looks up from his plate. “You don’t say...”

Excited that I’ve once again found the one topic that we can discuss, I say, “Yep. I bet it’s pretty good.”

My grandfather crumples his napkin up and puts it in the middle of his empty plate. “Well, the guy was a damned druggie anyway. Mind’s probably melted.”

“But I bet the music...”

“The music was good. But it can’t be no good after he ain’t sang or played in all these years.” He swigs down the last of the milk in his glass.

I finish my turkey stuffing in silence while the conversation travels elsewhere; I am sad that Fogerty provided no redemption.

We finish dinner and my cousins are already in the kitchen poking at the dessert. My uncles begin playing their fiddle and harmonica, and my grandmother sits down at the piano, telling them which songs to play in which order. She begins to play, and my grandfather comes to join with his fiddle. They begin a rendition of “Amarillo by Morning” and continue with bluegrass. Occasionally, my grandmother informs my grandfather that he’s not keeping with the beat, but he can’t hear because of his aid, which causes her to pound the piano keys violently.

I slip out of the house for a moment and walk over to the barn. It’s dark, so I open the doors slightly to let in light. My feet make swooshing sounds across the floor; I look down to notice the remnants of cornmeal that still provide a slightly slick surface. For a moment, I stand on the floor, remembering the music and dancing, remembering exactly where my grandmother, grandfather, and uncles used to stand when they were playing bluegrass on warm summer evenings in the canyon. I was proud to know them, to be a part of them, as I danced around the barn floor in my western clothes, my blonde braids bobbing up and down with the rhythm. I walk over to the corner of the barn and look at the wall, which now stares back blankly.

The picture of Fogerty is gone. I scan the floor, thinking it may have fallen, but I can't find it. I slip out of the barn, close the doors, and walk back to the house.

As I walk back in the door, the familiar sound of bluegrass greets me. The party is beginning to turn rowdy. Soon enough, a jar of moonshine has been recovered from the stash in the attic and is being passed while everyone dances around the large, drafty living room. One of my uncles goes in search of his potato gun, a homemade device made of plastic tubing that shoots out whole potatoes at a particularly impressive speed, so he can go and "shoot stuff." This is a cue for my parents, brother, and me to gather our coats, say our goodbyes, and walk out to the truck. As we squeeze into the front seat, I think of how we used to fit comfortably when my brother and I were small and we made these windy trips along the river, down into the canyon. Over the years, we've grown, and this growth has caused discomfort. We sit shoulder to shoulder tightly across the bench seat. On our way out of the driveway, we pass the barn, bunkhouse, and tractor, and I realize that these familiar landmarks of my childhood will only grow more foreign as I continue to separate from the Kieseckers.

I haven't traveled to Troy since my sophomore year of college. I saw my grandparents briefly while I was visiting my mother in Joseph this summer, but that was the first time we'd spoken in three years. My grandmother talked about how the deer were eating raspberries off of the bush in her yard ("gonna have to shoot 'em or trap 'em or somethin'") and told me a story of how she found a rattlesnake in the bunkhouse. We spoke of the past; we spoke of Troy. They updated me on family

felonies and misdemeanors and news about county fiddle contests. I learned how many times the Grande Ronde flooded in the last three years, flowing into their yard, and how many times lightning had struck a tree somewhere on their property (the lightning storms there are awful and the lightning usually strikes very close). I thought of Troy and my time spent there as a child. As a nine year old dancing across the barn floor, I'm not sure if I could have pictured my twenty-four year old self so distant, so different, but I am thankful of the changes even though they come with awkward separation. Before my grandparents left, I promised to go to Troy to visit, though I haven't yet. Perhaps I'm scared of the awkwardness or afraid that they will no longer consider me a member of the family.

There is this odd thing about family. They continue to stay family throughout new changes and chapters of life. Friends fade, environments change, but family stays. Family remains family regardless of distance and relationship. My mother's words—her justification for traveling down to Troy—flash back to me: "Family is family." No matter our differences or our distance, we are inevitably connected. Too much has created a gap for me to ever travel back to Troy and feel at home as I once did, but I remain attached through something more than Fogerty. His words to "Around the Bend" flash through my head, reminding me of the places our lives can take us, far away from the familiar and beyond the destinies our families and communities may have intended. I will always wonder if Fogerty intended for the song to be about Troy. For me, it always will be, as it serves as a reminder of what was once home to me, and also an inspiration to explore all that is "at the end of the highway," even if this exploration causes tension and discomfort. Meanwhile, "the

risin' wind" carries me further from Troy and everything this heritage implies, around new bends.

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Rooted in Timber

From where I lie sleeping in my bedroom in the corner of the house, I can hear my father pouring freshly brewed coffee into his thermos. It is 2:30 a.m. I am already awake, but I know he will be in shortly to wake me up so I can roll out of bed, put on the warm clothes that I have set out on top of my dresser, and groggily follow him through the darkness of our yard to his log truck parked at the edge of our driveway. I am eleven years old. It's June. Last night, I begged my father to let me ride with him to work and he reluctantly agreed—reluctantly because he knows I'll tire of riding in the truck after about our first load and he'll have to drop me off on the highway that runs by our house so I can walk home. I know I am not cut out to be a logger like him, but the adventure of leaving the house while it's still dark, stepping high up into the cab of the truck, and sitting beside him while he expertly drives us into the woods is too exciting to resist. I hear the gurgle of the truck engine as he starts it so it can "warm up" before we leave. The truck is his—a Peterbilt—the result of a desire to go into business for himself. I walk into the kitchen. Matter-of-factly, he asks, "Did you wear layers?"

"Yep. Got three layers." I say proudly. Although it's June and the weather is getting warmer, it's still the middle of the night. By nine, I'll peel my top layer off.

"Let's get." He grabs his thermos and holds the door open for me.

I'm proud that I can open the door to the truck by myself and use the bar on the side of the cab to pull myself up into the passenger seat. My father sets his non-sliding coffee cup on the dash and puts the truck into gear. I look at the darkness of the neighbors' house beside the driveway and wonder if they wake every morning

when the log truck gurgles to life. I feel powerful riding in a piece of machinery capable of plowing through a brick wall, capable of carrying dozens of tons of recently de-limbed and de-lifed trees to our local mill each day. My dad is a logger and this is his truck.

He is paid per load, which is his reason for rising at 2:00 a.m. to begin his workday. He will drive until 5:30 tonight, which could mean four to five loads if he drives quickly and doesn't stop for breaks. As we pull onto the highway, he finishes the last of the coffee in his cup. Next, he does something that never fails to entertain me. He takes his thermos with one hand and unscrews the top while holding the big steering wheel of the truck with his other hand. He places the cup between his knees and begins pouring while navigating the big rig around the bends of the highway. He has learned to do many tasks while driving in order to maximize his load quota, including filling out his mandatory hauling paperwork and scanning the "Auto Trader" magazine. As we turn off of the highway and head further onto the mountain, the paved road ends and the gravel begins.

It is still nighttime, but there is an entire community—a community of loggers—that are already well on their way to beginning the day. As we wind into the mountains, we meet two log trucks spaced about a mile apart. The CB radio crackles as we meet the first truck. "Ho Geno," comes through the fuzz of the radio.

"Ho" is intended to be hello, but the e's and l's slur together. My father's name is Gene. His CB "handle" is just "Gene" or "Gene-0," though most of the other drivers have random handles like "Spaghetti" or "Slim," even "Stinky." My father is a "straight-shooter," and thus far has no random character trait that can be used to

create a quirky handle. He picks up his CB. "Mornin' Kink." He greets the next truck we meet with a "Ho" and a handle. Occasionally, he picks up the CB to let other trucks know of his presence so there will be no big surprises if they meet on a narrow corner. He pushes the button to talk: "This is Gene-o, 'bout mile marker twenty one."

We drive deeper into the woods, and I can begin to see the powerful lights of logging equipment: a skidder, delimber, and loader create a glow that lights up the forest around them. Trucks wait in line to be loaded while the skidder pushes logs to the delimber to be de-limbed and then deposited in front of the loader. It is the loader's job to unstack the log truck's trailer (the trucks arrive with their trailer stacked on top of the truck) so the truck can be loaded with fresh logs. When it is our turn to be loaded, my father steps out of the truck to talk to "Thirsty," the loader operator. I remain in the truck, an anonymous observer to the thriving atmosphere around me at 4:00 a.m. I hear loggers chatting on their CB's and see them standing in front of their trucks with mugs of coffee, joking and laughing with one another. They will work for fifteen hours before returning to their homes (or to the bars first, for drinks) for a quick dinner and several hours of sleep, only to awake at 2:00 a.m. tomorrow morning to begin their routine again.

My father returns from talking with "Thirsty," and we wait in silence while Thirsty loads logs onto our trailer. I am a boisterous, obnoxious eleven-year-old girl, rarely silent, but my father prefers silence and this is his environment. Occasionally, I'll ask him a question like, "Why does the guy driving the de-limber have a patch on his eye?" or "Why do they call it a 'skidder'?" to which my father replies with quick

answers, or occasionally an “I don’t know, Minny.” (He liked to call me “Minny” but my mother preferred “Mindy.”) Aside from my questions, we sit silent in the cab, listening to the grumble of the machines, the whine of chainsaws, and the occasional fuzzy speech on the CB.

When we are fully loaded, my father puts the truck in gear and begins to make his way back down the mountain—more slowly this time as our heavy trailer bearing the weight of four tons of logs follows awkwardly behind us. My father says nothing and focuses on the windy dirt road. I yawn lazily, wondering how he drives for an entire day without falling asleep. I can feel my eyes trying shut, but I must prove to my father the logger that I am a tough girl, and that I can fight sleep just as he can. “Dad...” I begin.

He looks at me as he shifts down for a corner. “Yeah?”

“Do you like being a logger?” I have never asked him this question, perhaps because I knew that if he had the choice, he would not rise at 2:00 a.m. five days a week to drive an awkward piece of machinery back and forth between town and the woods; he would not spend the day away from his wife and children exhausting himself for—what?—lumber; and he would not spend his weekends underneath the hood of the big Peterbilt tuning or fixing its latest malfunction. I didn’t ask until now because I did not want to admit that my father “lived to work and worked to live,” as I had so often heard. And I feared learning that my father spent fifteen hours a day being miserable so that I could have new tennis shoes and school lunches.

My father takes a sip of his coffee and smacks his lips slightly.

“Well...huh...not really, Minny.”

“Then why do you do it?” I know why he does it. He does it because, at one time, it seemed to be the most practical thing to do, the best way for a man without a college education to support a wife and two children, because at one point, he thought it would be neat to have a truck of his own. Because this environment of heavy machinery, grumbly voices, and whiskey on the weekends is his environment and the only way he knows. This is my father, the logger.

“Well, I guess, because I have to have a job. Gotta make money, you know. Put food on the table.” He takes another drink of his coffee.

“Why don’t you get a different job?”

“There’s not a lot I can do.” He pauses. “I used to want to be a teacher.”

“Really? Why don’t you do it now? You could go to college.” I say this knowing that my father will never attend college. He had a hard time with high school. He always tells me, “School really wasn’t my thing.”

“Yeah, I don’t know.” He says this as if he’s considering the idea, but I know he’s not. I know, as I ride along in the red and blue striped Peterbilt that he will always work long hours doing some sort of physically exhausting work, and that his long hours spent working will strain his body, making him age quickly for the sake of... “food on the table.” For now, he is a logger. The rumors in our county are that the trees will eventually run low, forcing loggers out of work. I worry about what he will do. I picture him as a brick mason, a carpenter, a welder. But, as we bump along the dirt road with a load of logs, I watch him, my father, the logger.

We pull onto the smoothness of the highway that leads to town, and I can no longer force my eyes to stay open. I remove a layer of clothing and lean my head

against the window of the Peterbilt. My father sips his coffee quietly and shifts the truck's gears.

I awake to the sound of the truck's gears shifting back down as we pull into the driveway that leads to the mill. We meet other trucks on their way out, their trailers empty and stacked, on their way back to the woods to retrieve another load. We arrive at a piece of machinery that will take the logs from our truck so they can be watered and processed, and stack the truck's trailer back on top so we also can leave to fetch a new load. It is 6 a.m. now and the rest of the community is beginning to wake up, though the loggers have been working since two-thirty.

I watch as the awkward piece of machinery uses its claw-like metal arm to remove the logs from our truck. When our trailers is stacked, my father looks over at me. "Minny, finish school and go to college. You don't want to be a logger." He pulls back onto the highway.

"Okay, dad." I know that this is difficult for him to admit—that he has regrets, that he has made mistakes.

"So, should I drop you off at the highway?"

"Yeah, sure...I'm not much of a logger." I give him a playful slug on his shoulder. This is as far as our conversation goes—but the words are powerful, for my father—who prefers silence. He pulls the truck over, and I kiss his cheek before opening the door. "Thanks, dad." I step down from the passenger's side and slam the heavy door. The Peterbilt pulls back onto the highway, destined for the woods.

“I’m going to Puget Sound to be a Logger!” I yelled into the microphone. Our local radio station, KWVR, had come to the high school to interview graduating seniors about their future plans. I had been accepted with full scholarship by the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. Ironically, the university’s mascot is a “Logger,” which is odd, considering the school’s reputation for environmental activism. Rather than saying, “I’m going to the University of Puget Sound,” I thought I would try to sound more common, less snooty, by fooling everyone with news that I was planning to follow in my father’s footsteps. It was the truth, slightly skewed.

The radio station played the interviews randomly between commercials and radio programs, and it didn’t take long before my community was confused. My father returned home from work one evening and explained to me that all of his friends had heard the interview on the radio and were excited that I was going to be a logger just like him—but they were confused. After all, they didn’t think that I seemed like the type of girl to be a logger. He had to explain to them that my university’s mascot was the “Loggers.” If only by name, I was proceeding in my father’s footsteps, destined to be a Logger too.

The University of Puget Sound is a small liberal arts college. Tuition and fees at the university when I applied were just under twenty thousand dollars, which was more than two thirds of my father’s annual income. But I took the advice he had given me in the Peterbilt that day and resolved to go to college. From the beginning of high school, I became involved in as many activities as possible; I strove for a 4.0 GPA; and I took on community service projects, sometimes inventing new projects so

I could add them to my resume. I knew that a strong resume would be my only means of affording college. My determination paid off. The grants and scholarships I had received in my community combined with the grants and scholarships the university awarded me amounted to an amount just under UPS's price tag. I withdrew the money in my savings account (collected from summers of babysitting) and was able to pay the balance of my tuition and my room and board for my freshman year. I was off to UPS to be a Logger.

I turn onto Warner Street with one eye on the road and the other eye on my map sent directly from the admissions office, along with my freshman orientation packet. It's 2:00 p.m. I left my home, my sobbing mother, and my sense of security and familiarity at 5:00 a.m. this morning. I glance quickly in my rearview mirror at my smeared mascara and red eyes, attempting to spit-clean the black from beneath my lids. My parents said that they "could" take off work if I "needed" them to accompany me to the university, but I know they cannot afford to take two days off of work to drive across the state and up into Washington just to ease my nervousness, so I told them I would go alone. My old blue Mazda is weighted down with most of the contents of my bedroom. My back window is adorned with a clear sticker that says "University of Puget Sound" in red and white letters—compliments of the orientation committee.

Glancing down at the map once again, I turn right onto Alder and see the Seward Dormitory in front of me. I breathe deeply and pull into a parking spot. Seward is bustling with nervous co-eds and equally nervous parents carrying loads of

clothing and dorm furniture in and out of the building. I sit and watch from my car as upper-middle class mothers carry boxes of newly purchased supplies into the building so that “Jenny” or “Drew” can feel at home. Volvos and Land Rovers line the parking lot, their hatchbacks open and armed with bean bags, bedding, and laptops.

At my father’s suggestion, I am wearing layers. He was concerned that I would be too cold this morning when I left at 5:00 and too hot once I arrived in Tacoma. I step out of the Mazda and shed my sweatshirt. An anxious mother walks past me and smiles nervously. I am suddenly thankful that I’m making this transition on my own. I picture my parents pulling up to the university in my father’s large Dodge diesel pickup truck, the engine rumbling with torque, my mother dressed in her latest Wal-Mart jumper and tennis shoes, my father wearing his work boots and “Carhart” overalls. They would feel insecure among luxury SUV’s and Brooks Brothers casual wear—a feeling I’m beginning to understand.

The hall is bustling with students eager for their parents to leave, and parents clinging to their last moment of togetherness before their children become independent. As I walk into my new room, my roommate greets me with a “Hi-iii!” She shakes my hand enthusiastically. “You must be Mindy. I’m Katie.” Katie has set up her computer, made her bed, and decorated her side of the room. A teddy bear with her name on it stares at me from her bed.

“Yeah. Hi.” I smile, but I’m slightly overwhelmed.

Her father walks in the room with a giant jar of quarters. “You’ll need these, Kate. I think this is the last of it.” He looks at me. “We’re sooo excited to meet you. Did your parents come?”

“Um, no, they uh, had work...deadlines.” I shrug, thinking that adding the word “deadlines” sounded sophisticated.

As I make trips from my car to the room, Katie and I begin our small talk about where we’re from and why we chose UPS.

“My dad was a logger,” Katie says proudly. “He really wanted me to come here too. So, here I am. What about you?”

My dad was a logger too. I resist saying this, afraid that I will have to explain more about my background than I care to share. Our communities of loggers are remarkably different. “I really liked my visit here. This place is different from anywhere I’ve been.” Drastically different. I continue to unpack and set up my room while Katie’s parents put off leaving for as long as possible until there is nothing more for them to do. They say their goodbyes and Katie and I make plans for the evening, deciding that we will go to a sorority party she’s heard about.

After eating for our first time in the dining hall (there’s a vegan bar and an asian grill: new experiences for me), we prepare for our first party. The Gamma Phis are throwing a “wine and cheese party” at a house off of campus. I watch Katie as she picks out her outfit and match my style as closely as possible to hers. Katie is from Palo Alto, California, where she attended a high school that boasts an annual tuition that is higher than our college’s. Palo Alto is slightly more stylish than Joseph, Oregon so I follow her lead. We leave the dorm and head down Warner Street.

A cheerful Gamma Phi answers the door. “Hi-i Logger girls!” she says, raising her voice an octave on her second syllable. “Come in, ladies!” Co-eds stand

in the living room, mingling and chit-chatting with their selected glasses of red or white in their hands. The Gamma Phi takes our jackets, saying, “Wine’s in the kitchen!”

I follow my roommate into the kitchen where we both help ourselves to a glass of red. Katie walks into the living room and I stand at the counter, examining the bottle. I’ve never tried wine or drunk anything alcoholic for that matter, but it seems to be what everyone else is doing, so I take a sip. I walk into the living room and stand beside Katie. I taste my wine and barely resist spitting it back into the glass. I whisper to Katie, “I think my wine is soured or something. This stuff is horrible.”

She laughs at me. “It’s fine. I mean, mine’s fine.” She continues talking to a Phi Delt about The Dave Matthews Band.

I walk into the kitchen and find a can of Sprite. I inconspicuously pour some of the soda into my wine and head back into the living room. The Gamma Phi walks up to me and introduces herself. “So, do you think you’re going to rush?” she asks enthusiastically.

“Um, yes, I was thinking of it. When is that again?”

“The beginning of next semester. You should really think of Gamma Phi.”

She turns to go answer the door.

“Yeah, sure.” What is Gamma Phi? And what is rushing? I think to myself. This new community of Loggers has code language, and I must become familiar with these words. I grab a piece of cheese and wash it down with my sprite-wine before gathering the courage to approach someone. I look around the party, which reminds

me of a J.Crew ad. I spot a guy that I saw at the dorms earlier and resolve that I must talk to him, so as to not look like a loser. He is standing beside another girl who leaves as I walk up. "You live in Seward, right?" I stammer as I walk up to him.

"Yeah." He looks at my glass. "Why is your wine sparkling?"

"I found it in the kitchen. Didn't you see the sparkling Merlot?" I ask convincingly.

"That's impossible."

I quickly change subjects. "So what's your name?"

"Chad."

A real conversationalist, I think. "Where are you from?"

He talks about the suburb he's from and brags about his high school soccer team for awhile. "Where are you from?" he asks.

"Joseph, Oregon."

"Joseph?"

"It's a pretty small town...about a thousand people."

"Shut-up!" he says as he pushes me.

I wonder how the conversation shifted so quickly to me. "No, I'm serious." I laugh uncomfortably.

"A thousand people? That's like as big as my high school!" One of his friends comes and stands beside him. He introduces me. "This is Mindy. She's from Joseph. There're only a thousand people there."

"No kidding?" his friend asks.

"Yep. It's true." I'm getting annoyed.

“So, what do you do out there in Joseph? Do you go cow-tipping? Do you have running water?” He laughs at himself.

“Nope. Never cow-tipped.”

“What do your parents do out there? Like what kind of jobs are there?” He seems genuinely interested, yet slightly condescending. Several other people have shifted their attention to us, and I begin to feel like a circus act.

My father was a logger, but when he ran out of logs, he took up construction. My mother is a secretary. “My dad’s in construction,” I say. “In construction” could mean that he dabbles in skyscrapers. It’s a loose term—the kind of term I’ll learn to use while I’m at UPS in order to avoid awkwardness and keep from exposing my rural working-class background. I do my best to slip out of the conversation with Chad, as I now know that my background is a novelty, and I am a form of entertainment. It is awkward and uncomfortable to be singled out as different, and over the course of the semester, I will learn how to blend in perfectly with my fellow Loggers.

I adjusted quickly to the environment at UPS. I learned the names of the sororities and fraternities; I worked part-time so I could afford the kind of clothes that many of the other women wore. I learned to speak like a rich co-ed; I mastered the act of portraying someone I was not. I was comfortable rejecting my past and adopting the lifestyle of my peers, as I transformed more each week into the person I thought I should be. After all, as my father said that day in the truck, I didn’t want to

end up like my parents. But was it better to embrace the loggers of my past or the Loggers in my current environment?

I was comfortable rejecting who I was in order to become educated and sophisticated, and was moving along full-speed as someone else until the second semester of my freshman year. That spring semester, I took an autobiography class with Professor Turnbull that helped me realize my identity shift since entering the university. On our first day of class, Professor Turnbull discussed what our autobiographies could tell us about ourselves. Our class had twenty-five students and Professor Turnbull thought it a good idea to introduce ourselves, say where we were from, and for some odd reason, tell the class what our parents' occupations were. As we moved around the classroom and students shared about their parents who were lawyers, doctors, finance executives, and professors, I began to understand why the university was paying my tuition. I was one of the few students who couldn't afford the tuition; I was part of the university's diversity initiative. When it was my turn to introduce myself, I told the truth in specific, rather than loose terms: "I'm from Joseph, Oregon. My father is a carpenter and my mother is a secretary." *Look at me! I'm diversity, sitting right here in front of you! Your parents are paying my tuition too!* I looked down at my notebook.

Professor Turnbull raised her eyebrows in fascination. "I'm sure you'll have quite an autobiography to share," she said, in an attempt to be soothing.

For the first time since I arrived at UPS with its beautifully groomed landscape, neat brick buildings, and upper middle class student body, I was proud of my rural working class background. I had an interesting autobiography; I was

diverse. But it also occurred to me that my education and the environment of the university had caused me to be ashamed of this “diverse” background, as it was easier to transform into being like one of my peers than to perpetually feel a sense of class-based insufficiency. The quicker I could ascend into a different class, the sooner I could feel at an equal level with my peers. But in order to ascend, I had to break ties with my family and background. In Professor Turnbull’s class, I realized the effect this transformation was having on my identity and my relationship with my family. I knew I would have to come to terms with my heritage.

My autobiography spring term began, “I am a Logger. I am also the daughter of a logger.” These two sentences represented the tension I felt as a first generation college student at an expensive private university. At times, I wished I wasn’t the daughter of a logger, and at times, I wished I wasn’t a Logger myself. But, perhaps it was because my father was a logger that I had to continue with my education, that I had to face the tension of a competing past and present, and that I had to comprise my identity somewhere between early mornings spent in a Peterbilt and late nights spent drinking sparkling Merlot.

Stitches and Woodstoves

It's Tuesday. 12:30. I nervously fumble with papers on my desk. Why isn't he here yet? Maybe he's sleeping. He probably slept through class. I hope he doesn't flunk out of school. I told him he must work hard at the university. A knock at the door. I open it to see him standing in front of me, half-grinning. He's wearing an old stocking cap with skater shoes, a sweatshirt and baggy jeans. It's eighty degrees outside. He looks like a student. He puts his arms around me. "Hey sister." Although I cannot pinpoint the exact moment we began simply calling each other "sister" and "brother," I think the awkward nicknames began shortly after our parents' divorce as a subtle reminder to one another that in some important way we still have a family.

I look at Joe for a moment. Why does he have that burn on his arm? "Hi brother. You're late." Late. Late. Late in so many ways. Joe has only been early once in his life. He arrived three months premature. As he pulls away from me, I notice his purple, swollen hand. A fight. Not his fault, he says. He was drunk. My pulse quickens and my eyes begin to nervously and aggressively dart around as I inspect different places on his body. I look at his belly. Beer. "Have you eaten?" I ask. Not hungry. He needs to eat. He's paying too much rent, not studying enough, sleeping too little, drinking too much. School's tough, he says. Homework. He needs to do more homework. He's probably not studying enough. Why is his hair so long? It's time for a cut. Did he remember to lock his bike? Doesn't he know that bikes are stolen frequently in this area? That girlfriend of his, is she still being so controlling, so dramatic? He looks exhausted and worn. Maybe he would feel better

if I bought him something to eat. “Are you sure you don’t want something too eat? You look sick.”

He responds by putting his hand on my shoulder, as usual. “Sister, I’m fine.”

“There’s a restaurant right across the street.” We are interrupted by my officemate. Joe stands to meet him and I introduce them. “This is my little brother.” Yes, I know he’s not so little anymore—much taller than me. But still, he needs me. He needs me to wash his dishes, to tell him to eat, to lecture him about the importance of education, to beg him to stop drinking. This is Joe’s first attempt at true independence. He has been living with my husband and me since the divorce three years ago. It’s his first year at the university. He wasn’t planning to attend college, but I convinced him that it was necessary. He’s twenty-one. At times I wonder which of us is pursuing Joe’s degree. I think I want it for him more than he wants it himself. He really can’t manage on his own. He needs my help, but still, he avoids me. He evades my nagging presence, the way I tie his shoes for him, or fix his hair when it’s not combed, the way I roll my eyes when I hear of his mistakes, the way I yell at him in Spanish when I’m frustrated, and the way he can never seem to meet my expectations. I won’t allow him to avoid me. I am at his heels like a yapping dog, seeking his attention, hoping that if I yap long enough, he will do exactly what I want him to do. *Look at me. Woof, Woof. Listen to me. Woof, Woof. Don’t you see me? Listen to me.*

I attempt to unfurl my eyebrows and unwrinkle my forehead as Joe sits talking to me awkwardly. I am the disapproving sister. We look at one another and feel guilty. I feel guilty for making him feel guilty. Joe is my father, younger. My very

presence seems to ignite feelings of guilt and insufficiency in each man. I am the unceasing yappy dog. Our eyes rarely meet and our conversation practically bursts with unexpressed feelings masked by “so...” and, “anyway...” I say too much; I leave too much unsaid. I attempt to force feed food down Joe’s throat. Just one bite. I force education upon him as if it’s nourishment necessary for survival. Perhaps if Joe gets a degree, I won’t feel singled out, separated because of education. “How are your grades?” I look at the scar above his eyebrow as I always do. I bathe in guilt. I offer to make him a cup of tea. This is the cycle of our relationship. I do too much. I want to help. I hurt. I bathe in guilt.

He shrugs, which usually means two D’s, a C, and a B. I look at the man in front of me that I still regard as a child—the man I can no longer monitor and take care of every hour that he is awake. His scar looks bigger, more apparent. He looks like dad. Images of our childhood flash in my thoughts as Joe sits, talking awkwardly.

Joe is a toddler, not quite walking. He is small for his age, with large paper-thin ears that are transparent in the light. I see him crawling toward the woodstove. I see myself, an obsessive-compulsive five-year old with blonde pigtails. I follow Joe; he is my responsibility, my Beanie.

When Joe was born, he weighed only three pounds. My mother explained to me that he was our miracle. The first time I held Joe he became my miracle, my responsibility—self appointed—and I became quite protective. We called Joe “Beanie” because he had to wear a beanie on his head for more than a month after he

was born due to his fragile state. He wore his beanie home from the hospital and assumed the nickname shortly thereafter.

“So, sister, I’d better get to class.”

At points in our conversation, I forget that he’s speaking. “What about your hand? Have you had it x-rayed?” That’ll buy some time while I sit thinking of what I can say to him before he leaves—what I can say that will let him know that I really care for him and that I trust him to make smart decisions. But I don’t trust him. In fact, I’ve never trusted him. I’ve assumed the job of overseer, of protector, of nagging sister. I plan out his life and hope he will agree. I glance at the scar again and the same repetitive image plays itself. I see Joe, crawling towards the woodstove. I see myself. “No Beanie, not that way. Let me carry you.” He didn’t know not to touch the woodstove; I had to stop him. I was only trying to keep him from the scorching heat of black reality on his premature fingertips. I pick Joe up. He is heavy. I am small. The bureau drawer is open. I see him fall from my arms, cracking his head before hitting the bedroom floor. I see blood. I see his eyes rolling. I see him look at me, shocked. I am his protector. I have failed him. I cry, “Beanie, Beanie, I’m so sorry!” Hospital, bandages, stitches, blood. I was trying to keep him from the stove. He didn’t realize the stove’s heat; I didn’t understand the gravity of his little body. I bathe in guilt. I see Joe with his head bandaged. He is scared of me, and no longer trusts me as his protector.

I want to be his best friend—the kind of sister he can take roadtrips with, the kind of sister that will make tacos and Margaritas for him and his friends. I picture his roommate saying, “Dude, your sister’s so cool.” I picture him sharing his

excitement, his worries, his fears, his experiences with me. But for some reason, I have become a disapproving parental figure. I am the voice in his head, nagging him to do his homework, to stop drinking, to be responsible. We both seek acceptance from one another but fall short. He grabs his backpack and stands to leave. "I'm late for Biology."

I stand with him and walk him downstairs. His pants are too large, and he must hold them by the belt loops to keep them from falling down. Why don't his pants fit him? Maybe he's been spending his money on drugs. I ponder what I should say at our departure. Maybe this time if I say exactly the right words, he will begin listening to my advice; he will begin to do what I say. But, that strategy has never worked for me. I need to let him know that I'm sorry for my controlling behavior, that I love him, and that I really do believe that he is my miracle. We walk to his bike as he unlocks the lock and hops onto the seat, flinging his backpack over his shoulder. This is my chance; I must say something that will make him want to see me, something that will connect us. We hug each other and he begins to ride away. "Beanie..." I stammer, "I'm proud of you."

He puts his foot on the pedal. "Thanks, Sister." He kisses the top of my head and begins to ride away.

I cannot help myself. "Don't take drugs!" I yell after him.

Conclusion: On Finding a Home

Journey. Process. Course. Road. Expedition? Recovery. I imagine a Writers Anonymous meeting in my head. “Hello. My name is Mindy, and I’m a recovering writer.”

The crowd responds in unison, “Hello, Mindy.”

I continue. “I have been superstition-free for two months. I’ve been writing to my actual rhetorical audience with confidence. Pure, enjoyable writing for the value of writing and exploration.”

The crowd applauds.

“But I’m afraid I haven’t always been able to write uninhibited. In fact, writing used to be a strange, uncomfortable ritual for me. I had identity conflicts that interfered with my confidence as a writer.” I pause for drama. “You see, I grew up working class and entered an elite private school environment. I felt firsthand the separation and tension caused by class and education.”

People in the crowd gasp. The Writers Anonymous meeting in my head slowly fades away, and I enter reality. Apparently, I am never alone in my mind. Whether I’m picturing a rhetorical audience comprised of my professors, writing one sentence personal narratives to an imaginary reader, or confessing my struggles to a non-existent support group, I’m busy working through the issues of education and class that have been on my mind throughout my composition of this thesis. Though this writing process has been a bit like a recovery, it has also been a difficult journey that has brought about significant progress, understanding, and clarity. I now understand the word “process” with an entirely different perspective and connection.

I chose to conclude my thesis with a collage essay because I wanted my final essay to portray my developing experience as a writer, and my journey toward finding a “home” both as a writer and a person. I began this project as an unconfident, voiceless writer, inhibited by my superstitions and environment; this frustration and lack of confidence is evident in the first section of this chapter. Midway through my work on my thesis, I became more comfortable with writing—reliant on it in fact—and I began to gain confidence and clarity, and I composed the second section of this chapter. It wasn’t until I was writing the final pages of this chapter, however, that my understanding of writing began to click into place. My process provoked a necessary change in perspective: As I searched for my elusive home, I transitioned from an external focus to an internal focus, realizing that home is a feeling, not a place, both in writing and in life.

Section 1: My Private Fraud

I am a pretend writer. I play the role well. I’m creative and quirky, slightly eccentric. I have convinced my family, co-workers, students, friends, and professors that I am a confident, knowledgeable writer, but honestly, I can’t say that I am a writer. I know what is at stake in writing. I understand the confidence it takes to share myself on paper—documented, no take-backs—and this exposure terrifies me. I feel the frustration of aligning words in my mind and transferring them to paper in a way that makes them appear to be clear and well thought. I experience writer’s block constantly, but I am aware of that place one can enter as a writer (and I’ve only entered it once or twice) where every word flows from my mind to the page clearly

and intelligently—that place where, as a writer, I feel that my reader will identify with everything I’m saying, and everything I’m saying feels like it is exactly what needs to be said at the moment I’m writing it. In this place, my voice is appropriate; my style, well-suited; my tone, perfect; and my words, clever. Most of the time when I begin to write, I spend my time trying to get to this place that is somewhere beyond the lines of reality and consciousness; if I am able to transcend the barriers of my physical existence and get to this mental place of connectivity, I am at once reminded of why I write.

I am quite superstitious about the methods needed to arrive in this miraculous setting. I’ve developed strategies for arriving at this place, but I can never find a clear map, so I am constantly revising my lucky strategies, like one of those ladies at Sunday night bingo with her lucky daubers, dice, and toys. BINGO! It must have been the lucky red dauber. If only writing were as easy as bingo. Writing is tricky business and writers’ processes vary. My writing method truly discloses the anxieties of the writing process. In order to reach my special writing setting (which, as I said, I have only reached a couple of times during my career as a writer), I go through a long process, like a football team might for their state championship with team huddles, ibuprofen, ankle tape, and a strange destruction of the other team’s mascot. Only, I use none of these things. Still, the idea is similar as I set out to destroy my writer’s block: “We’re gonna crush ‘em! Go team!”

The prewriting process consists of agonizing over an essay topic for at least three days. Once I begin the writing process, I have a very specific routine. I type at my special computer lab, located at Willamette University, where I eventually

transferred to from UPS, and received a degree. There is something about the atmosphere of Willamette, combined with my memories of writing in the computer lab there that create a stimulus for thought. (This is a superstition, of course, but it's a powerful one.) Then, I must type—not handwritten—at this computer lab where, once, three years ago, I arrived at a place in my writing where I felt like a writer.

I choose a computer that is not too close to the back of the lab and not too close to the entrance of the lab. First, I must sit at the computer and re-familiarize myself with it. I usually play solitaire or check my email for five minutes before even opening the Microsoft Word window, as if I'm planning a surprise attack on my writing. On the right side of the computer is my water bottle. When the water bottle is empty, I will immediately refill it, as I must have water at the computer, even if I'm not drinking it. I have my headphones and CD player with me. I always bring the same three CD's. I will either listen to Christmas music, a country singer I don't like, or the soundtrack to a movie about a genius. These CD's are the CD's that I'm usually listening to when my writing goes well. The music must be playing, but playing so low I can barely hear it. Before I begin writing an essay, I must have my name and a title at the top of the page, and Times New Roman is the only acceptable font for me. As I reach the second page, I insert page numbers, which signifies that I have composed a page and am well on my way to having multiple pages. I try to reach at least two pages before my tea is gone, but because I must delete my title twice and my introduction at least once and recompose them, I usually finish my tea before reaching the bottom of my first page, which makes me feel defeated.

Usually, at this point, I decide that my essay isn't going well and I make a trip to the bathroom (third stall on the left) before slowly walking back to the computer to continue my battle. If an obnoxious valleygirl-type begins talking on her cell phone or two math majors begin discussing formulas at any of the surrounding computers within my earshot, I'm distracted and doomed. Once I begin writing an essay, I'm consumed with it until I finish writing. Usually, about the second-to-last page, I decide that I'm not happy with the paper, but hopefully, I'll be happier with the next one. While the goal of this routine is to help me arrive at a place where I'm satisfied with my writing, the unrealized objective may be to distract myself from the intimidating reality that I'm going to be writing an essay that my professors will read.

Writing is a mental struggle complete with multiple voices and consciousnesses. I usually defeat myself before I type my first word. If I make it past my second-guessing nature, usually a perceived audience in my head will take over, rendering me unable to compose. If any of my professors, students, friends, co-workers, or family members were aware of my lengthy battle with the various voices in my head, they would probably encourage me to seek professional help. Until now, I have kept my composing circus act and insecurities about writing to myself. Still, to a certain degree, writing is a process that involves multiple voices (both inner and outer) and multiple mentalities, and is much more complex than simply sitting down and composing. And, writing is by no means a solitary process, as each morsel of writing involves many characters, whether written or sources of influence. Writing involves the writer exposing his or her vulnerability on paper—a task both frightening and contrary to our survival instincts. A writer's words are dependent on mood,

audience, setting, ability, and objective, and that all of these elements will fit perfectly and combine to produce a perfect piece of prose is highly unlikely. Still, writers experiment with different approaches in an effort to find this magic formula, which explains my grueling superstitious process.

Despite my experience with writing, I often find myself in the same position as my students, who approach me with excuses like, “Writing isn’t really my thing. I just thought I’d let you know I’m not a very good writer.” I always respond with “I’m sure that’s not true,” and I recall my time as a composition student when I would say the same thing to my teachers before struggling through a semester. I still feel the same insecurity but am less vocal about it because, as a graduate student and teacher, I am expected to be a confident writer. Writing carries implications about identity, and students are quick to disassociate themselves from their words—a disassociation that will enable them to not take negative feedback personally. I understand their need for defense mechanisms. As a teacher and graduate student, I put up the same defense mechanisms although I am finishing my sixth year as a college writer.

Writing can sometimes feel like a war, and the composing process can feel like heading into combat, but there is something about this medium that keeps me struggling to pin down that feeling that I know I am capable of experiencing in my writing. It is the challenge and complexity of placing words on paper that keeps me sitting at my screen with my chai tea, water bottle, and annoying CD’s, searching my brain for a perfectly worded illustration. And it is my desire to know more about this incredibly multi-faceted form of expression that motivates me to continue studying, learning, and writing about both writing and teaching writing.

I am beginning to realize that to become comfortable in my writing will be a long process that I cannot pretend my way through. Acting like a writer will not increase my writerly confidence. I must discard my vision that writing is a monster, ready to spring at any moment if I do not type the right thing. I need to lose my superstitions and rituals and see writing for what it is: words on paper—words on paper that can move, stir, persuade, and excite, but in the end, simple words.

Section 2: Rotating Tires

As I write this, I am sitting in the waiting area of a Les Schwab Tire Center at the corner of Market and Lancaster. I have borrowed my friend's laptop so I can write whenever and wherever I have the time. I pray that he will allow me just three more weeks with this miraculous portable word processing machine, which goes everywhere with me. At this moment, three screaming children are fighting over a Snickers from the vending machine, phones are ringing, air compressors are whooshing, and the Indian couple sitting next to me is having a heated argument. I write. I hear nothing, as I attempt to gather my thoughts and compose a sentence between tire purchase transactions and two shifts of a busy Friday waitressing at the restaurant. I am on my lunch break and will have to return shortly to "Our specials tonight are the stuffed salmon and hazlenut crusted halibut," but for a moment I can take a break from the demands that contribute to my economic survival and compose. There is a skill to being able to escape into the glare of my computer screen amongst yelling, whooshing, crying, and buzzing, and it has taken six months, a lot of frustration, and a looming deadline for me to be able to acquire this skill.

I used to believe in writer's block. While I still struggle with this unfortunate plague at times, my position as a graduate student pushing onward to finish her thesis has necessitated that I somehow "beat the block," which means that I'm even writing in the waiting area at Les Schwab. When I first began writing my thesis, I was superstitious, believing that the right combination of environment and stimuli would help me to produce the kind of writing my rhetorical situation demanded. My writing process was slow; if I didn't have the perfect setting and motivation, I didn't write. As the months wore on and my page production grew slowly—too slowly—I decided that if I was ever going to finish my thesis, I would have to push outside of my superstitions about environment and simply write. Although being forced to write was initially an uncomfortable adjustment that left me sitting in front of a blank screen staring into the air for hours at a time, I eventually became comfortable with the pressure, and now as a writer, I can be confident that I have matured and my writing has improved.

The act of composing pages upon pages has significantly altered my writing process. (I told Dr. Ede of my breakthrough, but I have a feeling that she predicted this change. I think she has been waiting for me to move epiphany by epiphany through the stages of my thesis with a comforting reaffirmation that I have learned more about writing in the six months of composing my thesis than during my six years of education as an English major.) In the early stages of my thesis, Dr. Ede told me, "Your job is to generate text,"—a task that seemed simple, but proved to be quite complex, as I journeyed through the composing process, eventually travelling to a place far different than that from which I began.

My tire salesman has just asked me if I want my tires siped, which is apparently a process that renews the tires and lengthens their life—a refreshment just when they appear to be wearing thin. Hokey metaphors aside, I feel a bit revived and renewed myself. As a writer, I’ve encountered mental obstacles that have rendered me wordless; the process of maturing as a writer has been one of overcoming myself—no easy feat. From superstitions to procrastination to a feeling of helplessness, I have slowly, over time, handicapped my writing ability since the beginning of my college career. Though I have blamed my lack of confidence on the academic “powers that be” and their influence over me, I am probably equally to blame. But recently, over the course of writing my thesis, after processing eighty pages of frustration, I have experienced the enjoyment of writing, and the enlightenment and insight to be gained through a mere act of putting words on paper. As a writer, I have been siped.

A large man waiting for a tire rotation has just peeked over my shoulder. “Pentium I or Pentium II?” he asks eyeing my computer, which I think may have been one of the first laptops produced.

“What?...Oh, um, I don’t know. Pentium something,” I say, looking at the sticker on the front.

He comes closer and examines the technology. “That’s a Pentium I,” he says. And then after a pause: “I bet the thing don’t move very fast.”

I laugh. “Yes, probably not. I don’t really care though; I’m just using it for writing. Word processing. It works great for that. I love being able to use it.”

“Writing?”

“Yep. Writing. I write a lot these days.” I stare at my screen and continue to type something, anything, in order to end our conversation. It occurs to me that I am entirely unconcerned about anything outside of my need to write. I have not considered whether my computer is new or old, or if my version of Microsoft word is a '98 or a '00 version. My computer (or rather, my friend's computer) is simply a vehicle that allows me to use language and create words in order to express my thoughts. I have not considered that, perhaps, I look ridiculous toting an old computer, with a mere Pentium I processor, from obligation to obligation and errand to errand while I steal time to write. I am indifferent about my form of processor as long as I am able to process.

A short Latino man comes through the door from the tire bays and holds up a set of car keys. They belong to the old red Camry I have owned since my second year of college. “Mindy?” he asks, as I raise my hand and gather my things so I can finish my tire transaction. I look at my computer, proud that I have composed nearly four pages among an assortment of distractions, on my lunch break, while purchasing tires. I am a multi-tasker. At this point, writing has become an integral part of my life, not just because of the necessity of finishing my thesis, but because it now serves as an escape. I *need* to write, and it no longer frightens or intimidates me. While I do schedule time for writing outside of lunch breaks and errands, I am now able to write in environments that I never believed I could write in. The change in my writing process and my ability to write has been as a result of the demand to write so much so often that writing has become a habit, like flossing or taking my vitamins. It has also

become a necessity—so much of a necessity that I find myself finishing this particular essay and hitting save on my computer in the waiting area of a tire store.

Section 3: Finally...home?

Near the end of writing my thesis, I had to have my wisdom teeth extracted. I traveled home to my dentist in Joseph, the only dentist I've known since I was three. As I lie in the same white plastic chair of my childhood and stared up at the same posters and airplane mobile that I remember from the third grade, I began to think about my writing. And as the dental assistant draped a plastic cape over my neck and chest to prevent blood spatters from staining my sweater, I continued to think about my writing. *This is ridiculous*, I thought. *I'm about to have my gums cut open and my teeth jerked out by the roots, and I'm thinking about writing.* Oral surgery was merely an inconvenience, a distraction from my writing process. I had become obsessed with reaching a point in my writing where I could feel “at home”—a place of comfort, confidence, eloquence, expression, and situatedness for my rhetorical circumstances—a place where I could write apart from the multitude of professors' voices in my head. As I moved toward this point, it became more elusive.

I continued to think as the hygienist, Micki (a family friend I have known since I was ten), hooked up my anesthetic. Perhaps it is not my search for a “home,” but a new connectedness to writing that I've developed. Writing is now a necessary part of my day. What I can say about my renewed need to write is that I have reached a level of comfort where writing is no longer an intimidating production that requires a ritualistic process and leaves me feeling inadequate. Rather, writing has become a

means of interpreting, of searching, of expressing, and of understanding my experiences and my world. I am no longer separate from my writing, as the process of personal exploration has demanded that I pour myself into the act of composing. I have never felt so involved, so much a part of my writing, and so dependent on writing as a means of discernment and interpretation as I have since I began working on my thesis.

Blast! This is important stuff! I need a pen! I thought, as Micki took my blood pressure. She interrupted my thoughts for a moment: “Mindy, what’ve you been up to?” she asked casually.

I looked up at the posters on the ceiling and the airplane mobile and said, “Mostly I’ve been doing a lot of writing...This won’t put me out of commission for too long, will it? I need to write tomorrow.”

She laughed. “You were always a serious student. I remember.”

Booksmarts, I thought. My family always referred to my drive for education as “booksmarts.” Micki and I chatted about Joseph, her children (who are no longer children), and her job. It felt nice to be in a place of familiarity. Is Joseph my home? I felt at home, yet I had spent a great deal of time writing about how Joseph, and my life and family there, are now distant from my current home and life. In fact, the essays about my family deal with this attempt to find a home by reconciling the past and present—or perhaps they deal with the realization that there is no such thing as a concrete “home” as circumstances consistently change and distance develops. Our identification with “home” evolves as our lives move in new directions; at times, this evolution can feel tense and uncomfortable.

Should I get a pen? Should I postpone the surgery? This stuff is making sense. Maybe it's just nerves. Maybe it's the anesthetic starting to take effect. When I come out of surgery, will I be embarrassed about these realizations? I was beginning to argue with myself in my mind—never a good sign. I had to write my thoughts down; I had to be able to remember and make sense of what I was beginning to understand. I turned to Micki. “Can you take this nose-mask thingy off for a minute? I need to do something.”

She looked at me, confused, but removed the mask. “Is everything okay?”

“Yep. Just fine.” I grabbed my purse off the counter, took out a pen and a piece of scrap paper, and scribbled down some notes. *Now my writing is interfering with oral surgery.* Satisfied, I put my purse back on the counter. “Okay, I’m good.” She put the mask back on and turned on the anesthetic, which luckily, took some time to take effect.

I continued thinking about this idea of “home” that is a theme both in my essays about my family and my essays about writing. So, what about this elusive “home” in writing that seems unreachable, intangible, just words away from comfort and satisfaction? Perhaps this is the challenge with writing, and the factor that keeps me formulating words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into essays—that this “home” is unreachable because it is ever-changing with time and circumstance. To know the exact formula for arriving at this “home” is to take the mystery, the challenge, the spontaneity out of the composing process. Writing would be reduced to a skill or task, rather than a way of exploring, expressing, and gaining understanding.

While it has been necessary throughout my graduate writing career to rid myself of the mental inhibitions (i.e. unnecessary rhetorical audiences, “rules,” and superstitions) that blocked my writing process, I now realize that I must distinguish unnecessary inhibitions from necessary incubation, change, and growth. To struggle with the composition process produces writerly experience and growth; experimentation and the search for a perfect formula produce variety. To effortlessly arrive at this place that feels like “home”—if it remained constant—could be disadvantageous for both writer and reader. For me, the “home” has changed and evolved as I have grown as a writer; it has remained unreachable, which has been necessary for me to truly understand what it is to write.

I can't hold on much longer before this stuff starts working, I thought, as Micki, standing only a foot away, began to grow fuzzy. Is the outcome really this sad? All of this time spent reconciling the conflicting influences of my past and present, attempting to understand them on paper in order to arrive at a “home” both physically and in a writerly sense, and I arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as home? How depressing. Or is it? Possibly, it's just that with growth and change, the feeling of “home” never remains constant, which isn't necessarily negative, but rather an important part of the development process. It's just painful and frustrating at times.

One hundred and forty pages of writing and reflecting and I choose now to arrive at conclusions? My mind was traveling; things were beginning to fall into place. I thought of the surrealness of the fact that, minutes before surgery, while staring up at old posters and an airplane mobile, I had such a moment of clarity. *I*

really hope it's not the drugs, I thought as I faded into sleep. But it wasn't the drugs; it was a feeling of peace and closure I had not experienced since I began my first year of college.

I felt and voice and identity comprised of my own preferences and qualities

Micki patted my shoulder. "Mindy, you'll feel some pressure, but it should go away pretty quickly."

Work Cited

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